

says that Castro's Marxism was hidden (even from the rank and file of the Communist Party) because of "the need of preventing the Americans from having a banner for an intervention, as they had done in Guatemala." Considering what happened to Guatemala after the 1954 coup, it's hard not to see Roca's point. But the Catch-22 is also apparent: conceal your true intent to avoid being invaded, only to be castigated for deceit and betrayal—the characteristic Marxist sins.

The unanswered question, of course, is whether the circle can be broken. The Carter Administration's reluctant agreement to coexist with the Sandinistas marked a kind of high point in U.S. tolerance of Latin American independ-

ence. But I'm haunted by the memory of how Carter officials defined the limits of their tolerance. Robert Pastor, one of that Administration's brightest Latin Americanists, once explained, "We gave the revolution a chance. We swallowed the adolescent incantations about U.S. imperialism for as long as we possibly could." Wrong, Bob, you never even seriously got started. The limits of coexistence, then as now, are not determined by the menace of Sandinista rhetoric, but by the parameters of our own arrogance—even in its relatively liberal form. Until that changes, a lot more Latin Americans will continue to agree with Castro that deceit is the only logical way to deal with us. □

dela, President of the first junta and a principal architect of the terror, smoothly declared, "In order to guarantee the security of the state, all the necessary people will die." While those defined as necessary were being eliminated, lots of "unnecessary" people died too. Or, as one jailer explained to a group of his prisoners, "In a dirty war the innocent [pay] for the guilty."

Eventually the horror ceased and in 1983 an elected civilian government made good on a campaign promise, appointing CONADEP, the independent, thirteen-member National Commission on the Disappeared, to investigate the evils that had gripped Argentina. Thus, one "official story," the military governments' various attempts to deny the state terror, was replaced by another—this earnest, painful attempt by Argentina to come to grips with its own guilt. *Nunca Más* (Never Again) is the title of the resulting indictment. Published in Argentina in late 1984 and now translated into English, it records in exhaustive detail an entire nation's descent into hell, with a restrained, matter-of-fact sincerity that is chilling.

Perhaps that is the most logical way to write about brutalities so far outside most human experience. As Terrence Des Pres points out in *The Survivor*, his perceptive study of the Nazi and Stalinist death camps, "A curious fact about language . . . is that to write about terrible things in a neutral tone . . . tends to generate an irony so virulent as to end either in cynicism or despair." The commission's report is dispassionate, and this tone throws its grim subject into the same kind of sharp relief that John Hersey created in *Hiroshima*. The weight of the evidence is merciless, and I cannot imagine any reader emerging from this testimony without being tempted either to cynicism or despair.

Yet, as always, farce attends tragedy. The report sometimes recalls the kind of Argentine slapstick found in Humberto Costantini's demonic satire *Gods, the Little Guys and the Police*, or Osvaldo Soriano's bleak comedy *A Funny Dirty Little War*. Consider this: Carlos Rolando Genés was a young Army conscript abducted and convicted by a military tribunal of "having become compromised through dancing with an extremist at a fiesta." He disappeared. Or this: the twin sons of Melchor Cáceres were abducted, according to one Captain Ferrone, because they "are

Official Stories

JAMES POLK

NUNCA MÁS: The Report of the Argentine National Commission on the Disappeared. *Farrar, Straus & Giroux.* 463 pp. \$22.50.

On 2 November 1977 I was kidnapped by a group from the Navy in Buenos Aires, Federal Capital. I was tortured. My new name was X-51.

—Oscar Alfredo González

If you know something, sing. If not, suffer.

—sign in the Vesubio detention center

I thought I knew it all, what a political prisoner was, how he suffered in jail, the things a tortured man felt. But I knew nothing. And it's impossible to convey what I know now.

—Jacobo Timerman

In 1976, Argentina's military overthrew the foundering government of Isabelita Perón. The nation held its breath and hoped for the best. After all, inflation had reached triple figures, government brutality and corruption were public knowledge, and the country was plagued by terror—kidnappings and assassinations—from both the right and the left. Jorge Luis Borges spoke for a good many of his compatriots when he said, in words that

continue to haunt, "Now we are governed by gentlemen."

Soon afterward the number of disappearances increased, and rumors of brutality toward prisoners at military bases began to circulate. Unmarked Ford Falcons on sinister missions sped through the streets in convoys. Screams were reported in hitherto quiet neighborhoods. Hideously disfigured bodies began turning up at cemeteries around the country. It became clear to any who dared wonder that Borges's gentlemen were rewarding popular hopes by institutionalizing the chaos rather than ending it.

In their war against "subversives," three successive military juntas gave in to their worst tendencies. Squads of thugs competed with one another for victims, sweeping through the country, "sucking up" (their term) people from all walks of life and of all degrees of political sophistication. Spirited off to secret detention centers, these men, women and children became the "disappeared," official nonpersons trapped in a capricious reign of terror.

People were seized, tortured and frequently murdered because they looked or talked like, or drove the same kind of car or lived in the same neighborhood as, the intended victim. People were detained because they spoke to the wrong person in the wrong tone of voice at the wrong time, because they happened to be somewhere they shouldn't have been, or simply because there had been a clerical error. No matter: as Jorge Vi-

James Polk writes frequently about Latin American literature.

considered subversives . . . they go out to paint graffiti on the walls after strumming on their guitars." The 17-year-old boys have not been seen since 1978. Various branches of the military and countless splinter groups competed with one another in using terror to pursue their own ends. Gangs of kidnappers lusted after the same targets with a single-minded greed and thugs shot it out in the streets while their intended victims slipped quietly away. The assassins were also territorial. One former prisoner recalls that a young woman was tortured and interrogated by the "wrong" group of torturers, who had no "claim" to her through some perverse right of capture. "When the ones responsible for her found out, they were very annoyed and they even told the young girl that if it happened again 'she should not answer them.'"

There are numerous stories of such bumbling. It would not be hard to write Argentina's dirty war as a comic opera, but it would be monstrous. As many as 30,000 people were secretly held and tortured there (the commission has firm documentation on 8,960 who have not reappeared); many of them experienced methods of torture as gruesome as any ever devised. *Nunca Más* records them all, but one method, perhaps, best reflects the inhuman heart of the terror: thousands of "transfers," prisoners drugged into docile semiconsciousness, were bundled into cargo planes, flown far out to sea and shoveled out alive. Occasional navigational errors or miscalculated ocean currents caused the odd corpse to wash up on the beaches of Argentina or Uruguay, but generally those who were "given a pentothal and sent up aloft" were out of sight, out of mind.

Argentina's horrors, no matter how widely publicized in recent months, have never before been catalogued with such devastating effect. *Nunca Más* has a special claim on our attention, for the witness here is also, in a sense, the accused. *Nunca Más* is a government document, just like a report on estimated population densities in the year 2000—or, for that matter, the Watergate report, but a government publication is the last place one would expect to find the kind of moral rigor that is apparent in these pages.

Shortly after the war in the Malvinas/Falklands, the junta collapsed, and the newly elected President, Raúl Alfonsín, appointed CONADEP. This

was an extraordinary act, almost as if the Germans had decided to hold the Nuremberg trials on their own. Taking its role seriously, the commission examined the relevant documents, visited the relevant sites (there were about 340 detention centers throughout the country), took testimony from the relevant witnesses and came up with a straightforward indictment.

The commission was headed by the writer Ernesto Sabato, whose dense, convoluted novels (*The Outsider*, *On Heroes and Tombs*) seem like eerie precursors to the task of plumbing these depths. "I continued to explore the dark labyrinth that leads to the central secret of our lives," Sabato once wrote of his literary career. Certainly no labyrinth he combed for the sake of his fiction could have been darker than the one he had to explore to produce this report.

In making public the crimes of the military the Alfonsín government may have accomplished a kind of collective purge of the Argentine psyche, but so far only a handful of top junta and military leaders have been tried and convicted, while nearly 2,000 cases involving some 500 accused individuals—those who actually carried out the dirty war—still languish in the earliest stages of prosecution. There they may remain: public anger, so insistent in the first heady days of democracy, has become subdued over time, and is limited now to survivors, to relatives of the disappeared and to human rights groups. It seems that most ordinary citizens would just as soon forget and that their government would just as soon let them.

The President recently called a special session of the legislature to pass a law providing that further prosecutions be initiated within sixty days or not initiated at all. On the surface this law doesn't mean a great deal, since it has nothing to do with the many cases already going forward, however hesitantly. But it does send an obvious signal.

"The government is telling the military, 'We're going to put a stop to this,'" says Juan Mendez of Americas Watch: "It's as close to an amnesty as they can get." It's also a victory for the forces of reaction in Argentina—landowners, some church leaders, representatives of large business interests, the elite who have traditionally held and dispensed power in that country. Alicia Partnoy, who has recorded her experi-

GDR

(German Democratic Republic)

TEACHERS (AND FRIENDS) TOUR

14 DAYS

DEPARTS NEW YORK, APRIL 3, \$1479

ALL MEALS, ALL TRANSPORTATION
ALL FIRST CLASS HOTELS:
COMPLETE SIGHTSEEING

ITINERARY: Berlin, Leipzig, Halle, Dresden.

EXCURSIONS: Potsdam, Weimar, Erfurt and the Buchenwald Concentration Camp.

SPECIAL MEETINGS with the Friendship League of the GDR, "People-to-people." Q & A.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR TEACHERS to see the GDR educational process. Visits to all levels of schools, nursery to university.

PHONE OR WRITE

PROGRESSIVE WORLD TOURS

Dept. N, 4003 Islewood Dr.
Deerfield Beach, FL 33442
(305) 427-4779

MANY OTHER TOURS. WE ARE SPECIALISTS IN
RUSSIA***CHINA***AROUND THE WORLD TRAVEL

S
U
B
S
C
R
I
B
E
R

S
E
R
V
I
C
E
S

MOVING?

Send both your old mailing label and your new address to:

THE NATION
P.O. Box 1953
Marion, OH 43305

Please allow 4-6 weeks for processing.

QUESTIONS?

If you have any problems or questions regarding your subscription, please write to us at the above address or call:

(614) 383-3141

8:00 am to 4:30 pm EST

ences as one of the disappeared in *The Little School*, sees newspapers once

FURTHER READING

The portrait of Argentina during the terror, given such shape and substance in *Nunca Más*, is amplified in a number of other volumes, both fiction and nonfiction. The bizarre condition of the country before the arrival of the juntas is well described by Luisa Valenzuela in her novel *The Lizard's Tale* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$16.50) and by Osvaldo Soriano in *A Funny Dirty Little War* (Readers International/Persea, \$12.50). A useful supplement to the commission's report is found in *The Disappeared and the Mothers of the Plaza*, by John Simpson and Jana Bennett (St. Martin's, \$17.95), which names more names and puts the whole sordid episode into a historical perspective. Eduardo Galeano tells of the paranoia of the left throughout the region in *Days and Nights of Love and War* (Monthly Review Press, \$16, paper \$8). A number of novelists have explored the fears of the apolitical—most notably Humberto Costantini, in both *Gods, the Little Guys and the Police* (Avon/Bard, \$3.95) and the particularly chilling *The Long Night of Francisco Sanctis* (Harper & Row, \$15.95), and Marta Traba, in *Mothers and Shadows* (Readers International/Persea, \$14.95). The horror of the detention centers themselves was first described in the 1980 account of two former prisoners, *Testimony on Secret Detention Camps in Argentina* (Amnesty International Publications, \$2.95). The same horror is graphically described by Jacobo Timerman in *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number* (Knopf/Vintage, \$12.50, paper \$2.95), and in Omar Riva-bella's short novel *Requiem for a Woman's Soul* (Random House, \$14.95). The strength and courage of the detainees is well portrayed in Alicia Partnoy's memoir *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival in Argentina* (Cleis Press, \$7.95).

again treating the military with the old respect, while referring to witnesses who come forward to testify as "former subversives."

Despite all the discouraging signs, *Nunca Más* remains, the strength of its indictment undiluted by legislative acts or government decrees. "No one should forget what happened to us," President Alfonsín now says: "It is necessary not to forget so that it does not happen again." But remembering alone is simply not enough. We must remember, of course, that in Argentina democracy is a

most fragile thing, and that investigating the past with such unflinching honesty is itself an act of political courage. And yet there has to be more. The lesson of CONADEP and its report is that individuals were responsible for the excesses and horrors of the dirty war, and individuals must answer.

"There's no truth," protests a young student in the Argentine film *The Official Story*, "because history's written by assassins." *Nunca Más* shows that sometimes history is not written by assassins. □

All of Me

STUART KLAWANS

MY AMPUTATIONS. By Clarence Major. Fiction Collective. 205 pp. \$15.95.

Then later he told me to open my briefcase and read what was inside and I did, finding an official envelope stamped with the state seal. . . . "Read it," my grandfather said. "Out loud!"

"To Whom It May Concern," I intoned. "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running."

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

At the end of this review, I will do the unforgivable and reveal the punch line of Clarence Major's new novel, since that may be the only way to convince you to read the book. Mere description cannot convey the wild humor and audacity to be found here, nor the anxiety and cunning. The virtues of *My Amputations* are all active ones, best summarized, perhaps, as jumpiness. Only a demonstration of them will do.

Major—the author of *Reflex and Bone Structure* and *Emergency Exit*—has produced as his fifth novel a fantasy of the black writer as con artist, kept on the run over three continents. Part travelogue and part imaginary self-portrait, the book begins with its protagonist huddled in a closet in New York and ends with him in a hut in Liberia, having by that point met the Devil and worse. He has, in fact, met himself. Mason Ellis, the character on the run, is a half-mad ex-convict who imagines himself to be, of all people, Clarence Major—or perhaps Clarence Major, huddling in the closet, fears he's really Mason Ellis.

"The background of such a madman is at least of clinical interest. I strain to find something good to say." Thus the narrator, early in the novel, about Mason. Raised in South Chicago by a stepfather who's the Man of Rules and a mother who's the Woman of Blues, Mason does a tour in the Air Force, reads everything he can lay his hands on and, after his discharge, makes the mistake of going home:

The South Side was a madhouse of stumbling losers two-timing playgirls doublecrossing husbands failures and sneaky wives in search of a break in the flux; Muslims, junkies, devout simpleminded fire-and-brimstone-church-going handclapping holy folk. Judgment Day was only theatre: this was another cantaloupe.

In the space of three pages, Mason fathers nine children with two women and then lights out for New York, where the police pick him up on the Lower East Side for looking wrong. The charge sticks, and Mason does his next tour of reading in Attica. There, he becomes convinced that he is not merely the reader but the author of certain books, and that an imposter has stolen his identity and his \$50,000-a-year grant from the Magnan-Rockford Foundation. "Hadt't the other winners been announced in the news on TV in the rec room at Attica? Robert Penn Warren, Donald Barthelme, novelist Charles Wright, and another name Mason couldn't remember. Sorta like that old TV show called *The Millionaire*."

Released from jail, Mason sets out to collect. With the help of a private eye—who turns into the Claire Quilty of the book—he tracks down the Impostor, who is living on the Lower East

Copyright of Nation is the property of Nation Company, Inc.. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.